Baby, you better

—"I've been here times before

But I was too blind to see."

Michael Jackson - Dirty Diana

He stayed away from social media.

The apps were still there—Instagram, the others—sitting on his home screen like doors he chose not to open. He didn't delete them. Deletion would have been dramatic, a gesture, and Est was not interested in gestures. He simply didn't tap. The icons glowed with their notification badges—small red circles containing numbers he didn't read, accumulating like unanswered letters from a correspondent he had no obligation to reply to.

Behind those doors the narrative lived. Behind those doors the old, bitter voice could find fresh ammunition in every he seems cold and kai deserved better and does anyone else think he looks tired? Behind those doors his face was being dissected by strangers who had never met him and never would, who felt entitled to opinions about his relationship and his character and his emotional capacity because they had seen his jawline in a cologne ad and concluded, from the angle of his chin, that they knew him.

He stayed away.

But the phone stayed close. On the nightstand while he slept. On the counter while he cooked. On the balcony railing while he drank his morning coffee and watched the city rearrange itself in the early light. He checked his email. He checked his messages—the real ones, the private ones, the ones from Dana and David and Aunt Pim and the weekly text from Milo that always contained a photo of food and a single emoji, as promised.

The latest one: a bowl of ramen, slightly blurred, and a thumbs-up.

Est looked at it. Typed: Looks good. Sent it. That was enough. That was the whole conversation, and the whole conversation was enough, because some relationships didn't need more than a bowl of ramen and a thumbs-up to confirm that both people were still alive and still caring.

He checked everything that was functional and nothing that was social.

The packages arrived at his new address.

That was the moment it became real—not the flight, not the airport, not the apartment with its wall of glass and its pale wood floors and its view of a city that sprawled to the horizon like a promise. The packages. The boxes on his doorstep,

labeled with his name and his new address in the neat, square handwriting he'd used on the customs forms, the stickers and the shipping labels and the Thai postal stamps all confirming what the passport stamp had initiated: he was here. He lived here. This was his address now—not temporarily, not in transit, not as a guest in someone else's space, but as a resident, a person with a mailbox, a person to whom packages could be delivered because he had a door and the door was his.

He unpacked them in the apartment. Sat on the floor of the living area—the sunken part, the part designed for sinking—surrounded by tissue paper and packing material and the particular disorder of a life being reassembled from its components. The counter was becoming a staging area—products here, personal items there, the Marrakech tray holding the chipped mug and the keys and the small, daily objects of a life in progress.

The skincare went to the bathroom—lined up on the shelf in order of application, because order mattered, because sequence mattered, because the ritual of skincare was not vanity but maintenance, the disciplined upkeep of the instrument he worked with.

The makeup went to a drawer. Not displayed—stored. Available when needed, invisible when not. The tools of a trade he hadn't decided how he felt about yet. The hygiene products went under the sink with the quiet, unceremonious dispatch of items that were useful but not interesting, functional but not collectible. The opposite of the perfume shelf, which glowed in its glass-fronted cabinet like a gallery of bottled memories—each scent a time, a place, a version of himself he had been and might be again.

Dana called on Monday.

"How's the settling?"

"Settling."

"Helpful. Very descriptive." A pause. He could hear the twins in the background—Emma's voice rising in what sounded like an argument about breakfast. "There's a Valentine's Day photoshoot. The date is coming up. You can decline if you want."

She said it carefully. The way a doctor said we found something—neutral, professional, but loaded with the awareness that the information might detonate.

She knew what it meant. Not for the brand. For the narrative.

A Valentine's Day photoshoot—Est, the model who had abruptly ended his relationship, posing amid hearts and roses for a holiday dedicated to love—was gossip in its most combustible form. The brand wanted the attention. The irony was

not accidental. The irony was the product.

"What brand?"

"A fragrance house. Thai, mid-luxury. They're launching a Valentine's line—twin fragrances, one for day, one for night. They want two models. You'd be one."

"Who's the other?"

"Someone from the company. I don't have a name yet. They're finalizing."

He could decline. But declining would also be a story—proof that the breakup had broken him, that the cold villain was too fragile to stand in front of a camera on Valentine's Day without shattering. People would talk no matter what. The talking was not within his control. The only thing within his control was whether he showed up.

"I'll do it."

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure."

"It's a collaborative shoot—you and one other model. Side by side. The concept is contrast."

"Okay."

"Est." Dana's voice shifted. The manager voice receded; what replaced it was something older, something maternal, something that had been shaped by four years of watching this man endure things no one should have to endure while pretending he was fine. "If at any point during the shoot you need to leave, you leave. No questions. You just say the word and I pull you out."

"Understood."

"I mean it. You say out and I will have you in a car in ninety seconds."

"Dana."

"What?"

"I know."

She was quiet for a moment. In the background, the breakfast argument resolved—or didn't, but moved to a different room.

"All right. I'll send you the details tonight."

He could hear the comments before they existed. He could see the screenshots, the

quote tweets, the parasocial debate that would erupt and crest and subside and leave behind the usual residue of opinions that meant nothing and changed nothing but generated engagement, which was the only thing the platform valued, the only metric that mattered, the only currency more powerful than beauty.

He could decline. Dana had said so. The door was open. But the door was also a trap—because declining would be interpreted as weakness, as avoidance, as proof that Kai had won, that Est was too fragile to work on the day the calendar designated for love.

People would talk even if he didn't accept. People would talk no matter what.

The only variable was whether he was working while they talked.

The morning of the shoot was bright.

Bangkok bright—the white-gold equatorial brightness that arrived without preamble and hit the city like a camera flash, bleaching the concrete and turning every window into a mirror. No gradual dawn, no gentle transition from night to day. Just darkness, then light, then heat, the city switching on like a stage.

The studio was in the company building—Studio B, Dana had said, third floor, follow the signs. He followed the signs. The hallways were busy—people moving with the cheerful, caffeinated energy of a Monday morning in a building that housed five hundred creative professionals and the infrastructure to support them.

Studio B was large—higher ceilings than what he was used to, more equipment, more space. The kind of studio that could accommodate a full production: lighting rigs suspended from tracks in the ceiling, rolling carts stacked with reflectors and diffusers, cables taped to the floor in neat, color-coded paths.

The set was Valentine's Day incarnate.

Hearts—paper, fabric, flower petals—taped to the backdrop and suspended from the ceiling on fishing line, rotating slowly in the air conditioning like a mobile above a crib. Roses, carnations, peonies in vases and scattered across every flat surface. Red mylar balloons drifting near the ceiling, their strings trailing like tentacles.

Est looked at the set and felt nothing.

Not the numb nothing of the month after Miami—the flatline nothing, the absence of all signal. A professional nothing. The nothing of a person who knew the set was not the work. The set was the container. The work was what happened inside it.

"P'Est, welcome!"

The creative director was a woman in her forties—sharp, warmly efficient, the kind of person who made eye contact when she spoke and meant it. She extended her hand. "Khun Dana told me about you. We're thrilled you accepted."

"Thank you for having me."

"The concept is simple. Two fragrances, two moods, two models. You're the white fragrance—light, day, the top notes. Clean and a little bit mysterious. Your partner is the dark fragrance—night, depth, the base notes. We're shooting you separately first, then together."

"Understood."

She smiled. "Dana also told me you're very professional."

"Dana is generous."

"Dana is accurate." She gestured toward the wardrobe area. "Your outfits are ready. The makeup team is already set up."

He went.

The outfits were hanging on a rack. Two suits. Two hangers. Two versions of the same assignment. The first was white—linen and silk blend, the fabric so pale it was almost silver in certain lights. Single-breasted. No shirt underneath.

He looked at it.

No shirt underneath.

The jacket would close at the waist with a single button, and above that—nothing. The exposed skin. The small, V-shaped window between the lapels that would show his sternum, the hollow of his throat, the faint rise and fall of breath. His chest. His chest would be visible. Not fully—partially. The suggestion of skin. Leaving something to the imagination, but only something. The rest was offered.

He'd done this before. He'd done it dozens of times—the shirtless shot, the open collar, the strategic exposure of flesh that the industry called sensual and that Est called work. He knew how to hold his body in these shots. He knew which angle made his collarbones look architectural. He knew how to breathe—shallow, controlled—so his chest rose and fell in the rhythm the photographer wanted.

He knew all of this. And he knew, also, that knowing how to do it and wanting to do it were different things, and that the difference mattered, and that for six years he had ignored the difference because the house needed building and the bricks required his body.

He put on the suit.

The makeup artist was gentle—asked before touching, explained each product before applying it. Est noted this. Filed it. Good. The makeup was minimal: a wash of color on his eyelids, something luminous on his cheekbones, a tint on his lips that was barely there but would photograph as deliberate. The kind of makeup designed to look like no makeup, which required more makeup than makeup that looked like makeup.

He adjusted the collar. Looked in the mirror—full-length, propped against the wall, the glass slightly dusty, the reflection slightly soft. The white suit. The makeup. The jaw. The exposed chest.

He looked like a Valentine. He looked like a product.

"P'Est?" The assistant was at the curtain. "They're ready for you."

He stepped onto the set.

Photos with the perfume.

He held the black bottle in one hand, the red in the other—the twin fragrances, the yin and yang, the night and day—and the camera clicked, and the image was captured, and somewhere in the distance the future comment section was already forming its opinions.

Hearts. Close-ups. Full-body shots. The white suit catching every light, every angle, the fabric performing its assigned role with the professional obedience of material that had been designed to photograph well. Est gave them what they wanted—the jaw, the eyes, the stillness, the capacity for stillness that the magazine editor had once named and that had, since then, become his signature. The thing that made Est different from other models, the thing the cameras loved: his ability to be completely motionless and completely alive at the same time.

"Beautiful," the photographer said. "Hold that."

He held it. The way he always held it. The word beautiful bouncing off him like light off glass—absorbed into the image, reflected back to the camera, landing nowhere inside him.

The session took two hours, including wardrobe changes and makeup refreshes. Two hours of hearts and flowers and the precise, mechanical repetition of turning his body into a surface for other people's desires. He did it well. He always did it well. The doing-it-well was automatic now, a muscle memory as deeply encoded as breathing—which, in a way, it was. Breathing was the first thing you learned as a model. How to breathe so the camera couldn't see it. How to be alive without showing the evidence of aliveness.

And then the other model arrived.

Est heard him before he saw him—a voice in the corridor, speaking Thai with the casual, unhurried cadence of someone who was comfortable in this building, comfortable in this industry, comfortable in his own body and his own presence in a way that suggested either confidence or indifference. Est, who was skilled at distinguishing between the two, couldn't tell which it was from voice alone.

The voice was speaking to someone—a makeup artist, maybe, or an assistant—and what it said was unremarkable, something about traffic, something about coffee, the ordinary patter of a person arriving at work. But the way it said it—the rhythm, the ease, the total absence of performance—made Est pay attention.

The curtain parted. A figure entered the studio.

He was Est's height, maybe half an inch shorter, with a build that was lean but not delicate—the body of someone who moved regularly, who used his muscles for something other than display. There was a functionality to his physique that Est recognized as different from his own. Est's body was maintained for cameras—sculpted, managed, the product of discipline applied toward a visual result. This body was maintained for use.

His hair was gray—not the gray of age but the gray of intention, freshly dyed, a deliberate aesthetic choice that most people couldn't carry and that this person carried the way he carried everything: without apparent effort, without seeking approval, as if the gray had always been there and the world simply hadn't noticed until now.

He was wearing makeup. Already. Dark liner around his eyes—applied with precision, not by a makeup artist but by his own hand, the lines too personal, too deliberate, to be someone else's work. It changed his face. Not feminized it—sharpened it. Made the eyes darker, more defined, more difficult to look away from. The makeup was not decoration. It was architecture.

Dark street clothes. A black jacket, worn soft. Pants that moved when he moved. Nothing performative, nothing designed to impress—or if it was designed to impress, it was designed to impress people who understood that the most impressive thing a person could wear was comfort.

He contrasted with Est's suit the way night contrasted with day, which was, Est realized, precisely the point.

Dana approached from the side—she'd been watching from behind the monitors, where she always watched, the manager's position: close enough to intervene, far enough to observe.

"Est, this is Hong," she said. "He's also with the company. He's been here about six

months—part of the restructuring, same program that brought us in."

"Sawatdee khrap," Hong said. "P'Est."

The honorific was correct—the P' of seniority, automatic in Thai, the acknowledgment that Est was older. Hong said it the way you said things that were true but not particularly important to you: respectfully, but without weight. His voice was even. His eyes were steady.

Est could clearly see boredom in those eyes. Not hostility—boredom. The specific boredom of a person who had been in enough studios and done enough shoots to find the whole enterprise predictable. The hearts, the flowers, the concept of contrast—he'd seen it before, or versions of it, and the seeing had worn away whatever excitement the work might once have generated.

Or maybe it wasn't boredom. Maybe it was something else wearing boredom's face.

"Nice to meet you," Est said.

"You too." Hong's eyes moved to the set—the hearts, the flowers, the balloons drifting near the ceiling. His expression did not change. He looked at the Valentine's Day set the way you looked at weather: it was there, it was a fact, it would be dealt with.

"Have you worked with this photographer before?" Est asked.

"Once. Last month. She's good."

"Good how?"

Hong looked at him. The boredom flickered—not disappearing, but shifting, making room for something else. Curiosity, maybe. Or the recognition that Est's question was not small talk but an actual question, asked by a person who actually wanted the answer.

"She doesn't touch you," Hong said. "And she listens when you say no."

The sentence landed.

It landed the way sentences landed when they contained information that was simultaneously ordinary and devastating—ordinary because it described basic professional conduct, devastating because it needed to be said at all, because the fact that a photographer not touching you was noteworthy meant that being touched was the default, was the baseline, was what you expected until someone proved otherwise.

"Good." Est said.

"Yeah." Hong held his gaze for a moment. Then looked away. The boredom returned,

or the mask of it. "See you on set."

He disappeared behind the wardrobe curtain.

Est removed his makeup at the station—the slow, deliberate process of wiping away the camera-ready version of himself and returning to the version that existed when no one was looking. The cleanser. The toner. The moisturizer. Each step a small reclamation: this face is mine again.

He was changed back into his own clothes—the linen shirt, the dark trousers—when Hong emerged from the dressing room.

Est stopped.

Hong was wearing a dark suit—black, or nearly black, the fabric catching the studio lights with a deep, matte absorption that made the suit look like it was eating the light rather than reflecting it. And covering the suit, from lapel to hem, were flowers. Red flowers of various types—roses, carnations, peonies, others Est couldn't name—attached to the fabric, emerging from it, growing out of it as if the suit were a garden and the flowers had decided to bloom there without permission.

The suit revealed no skin.

The collar was high. The sleeves were long. The jacket was buttoned to the throat. Every inch of Hong's body was covered—not concealed, not hidden, but chosen. The suit said: you will see what I decide you will see, and what I decide is this: flowers and fabric and the architecture of clothing, and if you want to imagine what's underneath, that's your work, not mine.

Est stood in the wardrobe area, half-changed, his own shirt in his hand, and watched Hong walk onto the set. And he felt it—the envy. Clean, honest, uncomfortable.

The recognition was immediate.

Hong didn't bare his skin. Hong didn't offer the audience a window into his body. Hong offered them something else entirely—the flowers, the fabric, the movement, the visual richness of a garment that was not a frame for flesh but a work of art in itself. The sensuality was not in what was shown but in what was suggested—not by the body underneath but by the suit itself, the way it moved, the way it caught the light, the way the whole composition communicated desire without communicating availability.

He doesn't have to show his chest to project sensuality, Est thought. And then, harder: Why did I?

He knew the answer. He'd always known the answer. He showed his skin because they asked him to, and he said yes because saying yes was the job, and the job was the house, and the house was the reason. Except the house was gone, and the

reason had evaporated, and he was still saying yes because the muscle memory of compliance was stronger than the muscle memory of refusal.

Hong moved differently than Est. Where Est was still—the capacity for stillness, the lake surface, the controlled, precise economy of motion that cameras loved—Hong was fluid. Not loose. There was discipline in his movement, the kind that came from understanding his own body's architecture, from knowing exactly where his limbs were in space and choosing, deliberately, to let them move rather than holding them in place. But dynamic, responsive—the kind of motion that responded to the suit rather than controlling it, that let the flowers sway and the fabric breathe and the whole composition tell its own story.

Est watched. He stood in the wardrobe area, invisible behind the curtain, and he watched Hong be photographed amid the hearts and flowers and balloons of a Valentine's Day set. He watched the photographer give directions—"Turn left. Chin down. Eyes here."—and he watched Hong follow them with the mechanical precision of someone who had done this enough times to do it without thinking, while simultaneously doing something the photographer hadn't asked for: being interesting.

That was the difference. Est could be beautiful. Est could be still. Est could give the camera exactly what it wanted—no more, no less—with the precision of a machine designed for a single purpose. But Hong gave the camera something it hadn't known to ask for. Something unscripted. The slight tilt of the head that turned a standard three-quarter pose into something questioning. The way his hand found the edge of his lapel and held it—not adjusting, not posing, just holding, as if the suit were something he was in conversation with.

Their eyes met.

Brief. Less than a second. Through the gap in the curtain, across the studio, over the heads of the crew and the scatter of rose petals on the floor.

Hong's expression was unreadable. The eyeliner made his eyes darker, more defined, more difficult to interpret. The gray hair caught the studio lights and threw them back, silvered. The boredom that might have been something else—might have been guardedness, might have been the professional mask of a person who, like Est, had learned to keep the interesting parts of himself behind a wall and show the world only what it needed to see.

Est looked away first.

Not because he wanted to. Because looking away was what he did—the reflex of a person who had been trained, by years of industry and years of Kai, that sustained eye contact was an invitation, and invitations led to expectations, and expectations led to the specific, exhausting labor of meeting someone else's needs while

pretending you didn't have any of your own.

He looked away, and the moment passed, and the shoot continued, and the Valentine's Day set glowed red and white and pink around them like a heart that didn't know it was artificial.

After the shoot, he changed in the wardrobe area. Slowly. The suit went back on its hanger. The white fabric, which had spent two hours being a container for his body and a surface for other people's fantasies, hung there empty and deflated, a shed skin.

He was buttoning his own shirt when Dana appeared.

"Good work today."

"Thank you."

"The photographer loved you. Said your stillness was—her word—architectural."

"That's generous."

"It's accurate." Dana leaned against the doorframe. She had the look—the one that meant she was about to say something she'd been thinking about for longer than this conversation. "How did it feel?"

"How did what feel?"

"The suit. The concept. Valentine's Day."

He finished buttoning. Smoothed the collar. "It felt like work."

"Est."

"It felt like work, Dana. That's what it is."

"It is. But it's also—" She paused. Recalibrated. "The white suit. No shirt. Was that comfortable for you?"

He looked at her. She held his gaze. This was why Dana was good at her job—not because she could negotiate contracts or manage schedules, though she could do both with surgical precision, but because she asked the questions that no one else asked, and she asked them without flinching, and she waited for the real answer.

"No," he said.

"Okay."

"It wasn't uncomfortable in a way that matters."

"It matters."

"Dana—"

"It matters because you're not building a house anymore. You're not saving for a future with someone who—" She stopped herself. Took a breath. "The calculus has changed. You don't have to say yes to things that cost you just because they pay well. Not anymore."

He was quiet. The wardrobe area was dim—a curtained alcove off the main studio, lit by a single bulb that cast everything in the warm, forgiving light of a confessional.

"I'll think about it," he said.

"That's all I'm asking."

He was leaving the studio—bag over his shoulder, armor reassembled, the turtleneck back in place like a portcullis lowered—when he passed the corridor where the vending machines stood. Hong was there. Leaning against the wall, still in the dark suit, the flowers slightly crushed now from two hours of movement. He was drinking something from a can—iced coffee, Est guessed from the label—and looking at his phone with the particular expression of a person reading something he didn't care about but had nothing better to do.

He looked up when Est passed.

"P'Est."

Est stopped. "Khrap."

"Good shoot?"

"Good enough."

Hong nodded. Took a sip. "You're very still." he said. Not a compliment—an observation. The way you'd say you're very tall or you're left-handed. A fact about a body, noted and reported without judgment.

"So I've been told."

"Does it tire you? The stillness?"

Est looked at him. The question was odd. Not inappropriate—odd. The kind of question that came from a person who was genuinely curious rather than making conversation, who wanted to understand the mechanics of something he'd observed rather than simply acknowledging it.

"Yes," Est said. "It's exhausting."

"I thought so." Hong looked at his can. Turned it slowly in his hands. "Moving is easier. For me. The stillness—I tried it once. Couldn't do it. My body doesn't know how to stop."

"That's not a bad thing."

"No. But it's limiting. Photographers want stillness. They want the frame. I give them movement, and they have to catch it, and half the time they miss." He shrugged. The flowers on his suit rustled. "But I'd rather be missed in motion than caught standing still."

Est said nothing. The sentence sat between them—heavy, personal, more revealing than Hong probably intended. Or maybe exactly as revealing as Hong intended. Est couldn't tell. The eyeliner and the boredom and the gray hair made everything Hong said feel both casual and significant, like a poem written on a napkin.

"The flowers." Est said.

Hong looked down at his suit. "What about them?"

"Your suit covered everything. Mine didn't."

Hong met his eyes. The boredom was gone now—or the mask of it had slipped, revealing something underneath that was more alert, more present, more interested than Hong's default expression suggested.

"Yeah," Hong said. "I noticed."

There was no judgment in it. No pity. Just the observation—I noticed—from a person who, like Est, noticed everything and said very little about what he noticed.

"See you around, P'Est."

"See you around."

Hong pushed off the wall. Walked down the corridor with the unhurried gait of a person who had nowhere particular to be and was in no rush to get there. The flowers on his suit caught the fluorescent light and threw back small, fractured reflections—petals of light scattered across the corridor walls, there and gone, there and gone.

Est watched him go.

Then he turned and walked the other way, toward the elevator, toward Dana, toward the next thing—whatever the next thing was. Whatever came after standing in a room full of paper hearts and selling love to strangers while wearing a suit that showed his chest to people who hadn't earned the right to see it.

Whatever came next, he would face it. The way he faced everything—still, upright,

jaw set, eyes open.

But he would think about what Dana said. About the calculus changing. About the difference between saying yes because the house needed building and saying yes because you'd forgotten how to say anything else.

He would think about it.

And somewhere in the back of his mind, in the place where observations were filed and connections were drawn and the sponge-heart absorbed things it didn't yet know what to do with, he filed one more thing:

The voice in the corridor. The gray hair. The flowers. The sentence—I'd rather be missed in motion than caught standing still—spoken by a person who noticed what Est's suit did and didn't do, and said I noticed without making it a weapon or a kindness, just a fact.

Just a fact.

He filed it, and he walked to the elevator, and the doors opened, and he stepped inside, and the building hummed around him—thirty floors of creative people doing creative work, the energy warm and communal, the sanuk principle alive in the laughter drifting from somewhere above—and the doors closed, and he descended, and Bangkok waited outside with its heat and its jasmine and its infinite, forgiving sprawl.